



THE AXIOLOGICAL BANKRUPTCY OF LIFE

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Abstract

The meaning of life is not just some ordinary old philosophical problem, but also a practical one that, in some form, everyone wonders about. The whole meaning of life has always been linked with belief in higher values that form the incentive for the spiritual uplift of humanity. Even if spiritual values are illusions, they are absolutely necessary in order to give life meaning. When they disappear, it causes a serious disease of the axiological consciousness of man. The characters that are involved in the cultural stage hosting this drama are the idealist, who sets values as necessary illusions of the human spirit, and the wise man, who shatters any illusion of salvation through faith in values.

Keywords: eudemonology; idealism; the meaning of life.

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EL FRACASO AXIOLÓGICO DE LA VIDA

Resumen

El sentido de la vida no es solamente un antiguo y común problema filosófico, sino también uno práctico que, de cierta forma, cualquiera plantea. Todo el sentido de la vida siempre fue correlacionado con la creencia en algunos valores superiores que constituyeron impulsos para el ennoblecimiento espiritual del hombre. Aunque los valores espirituales sean ilusiones, ellos son absolutamente necesarios para poder dar sentido a la vida. Cuando ellos desaparecen, se produce una grave enfermedad de la conciencia axiológica del hombre. Los personajes que intervienen en el escenario de la cultura en este drama son el idealista, el que instituye los valores como ilusiones necesarias del espíritu humano y el sabio, que pierde cualquier ilusión relativa a la salvación mediante la creencia en los valores.

Palabras clave: eudaimonología; idealismo; el sentimiento de la vida.

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A new praise of folly

Perhaps not coincidentally, the great philosophers and writers have used ‘madness’ to highlight the ‘wrongs of the world’, as Don Quixote, ‘the most amusing madman’ in the world, puts it many times. Also Prince Muishkin, from Dostoevsky’s famous novel *The Idiot*, is an amusing madman, as is the character chosen by Friedrich Nietzsche to announce the death of God. The ‘madness’ of the latter is in fact the interpretation of this statement, especially in that it expresses metaphorically a truth so bad that it is impossible for the public ever to accept it. The entire speech about the death of God is like a diagnosis given by the philosopher as a doctor of the civilised world. He suffers from a disease that can be called the axiological bankruptcy of life, a disease that occurs when confidence in all values is fully lost and thus no sense of life can be maintained.

Posdnicheff, the main character in *The Kreutzer Sonata* by Leo Tolstoy, suffers from this axiological illness. He considers himself a kind of madman, not because he is out of his mind, but because he is too lucid. Normality implies a minimum of illusions. ‘I am a wreck, a cripple. I have one quality. I know’.(Tolstoi, 1971, p. 57.) Posdnicheff *knows* that values are only illusions necessary for life to be imbued with meaning. It is, moreover, the interpretation that Tolstoy himself provides in the Afterword to *The Kreutzer Sonata*: it is not rules but ideals that people need for their being not to degenerate.

The fact that *The Kreutzer Sonata*, published in 1889, had huge success throughout the world does not represent a symptom of decline or degeneration of the civilised world, Max Nordau says (Nordau, 1894, I, pp. 263 – 264), but rather is a cause for concern about the impossibility of living in a world completely free of illusions.

As long as there is faith in divinity, the meaning of life is not even questioned. It is self-evident. But when ‘the madman’ announces that ‘God is dead’, he means that the higher values, symbolised traditionally by God, thus fall into desuetude and so the life of the individual, of the society where he lives and the entire universe, loses any sense. ‘Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren’t we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn’t empty space breathing at us?’ (Nietzsche, 2001, p. 120) The madman, in the words of Nietzsche, was greeted by the crowd with a laugh, as has happened in history with all idealists. ‘The madman’ is actually the most lucid of mortals. In fact, the crowd who believed in nothing was seized with madness. In a dramatic manner, Friedrich Nietzsche expressed in this parable the axiological bankruptcy of life.

‘It is still recounted how on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there started singing his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but, “What then are these churches now if not the tombs and sepulchres of God?”’ (Nietzsche, 2001, p. 120) What does Friedrich Nietzsche really mean by his ‘madman’? That, already long ago, a transformation was made of the religion of Jesus into one about Jesus. Or, in other words, that we do not have to replace the ideal of Jesus with external ordinances, as Tolstoy stated via his hero in *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

Jesus himself, as mentioned in the *New Testament*, is taken, when selecting his twelve apostles, as one for whom it is true that ‘He is out of his’ (Mark, 3.21), even by those in his own family. But one who is not only the creator of a new table of values, but also believes in them and acts according to them, has always been regarded as one who is not exactly sane. Don Quixote is the embodiment of such an ‘idiot’. But the ‘madman’ in Cervantes’s novel is the most lucid of mortals. He ‘sees’ what the spirit of any man should essentially ‘see’. Fascinated to delirium by the light of truth, goodness, love, beauty and all positive values, Don Quixote is different from other people who are blind from an axiological point of view. For them, reality is only what they can grab with their hands, as Plato

puts it; by contrast, he lives, rather, in the world of Ideas, so he becomes a laughing stock.

Precisely this *laughing stock* is invoked by Plato in the famous myth of the cave when describing the reunion of the one who ‘saw Ideas’ with ordinary people, citizens of the ‘world of shadows’. In the *Republic*, Plato distinguishes, as we know, an intelligible world, or one of Ideas, and a sensitive one, metaphorically called the ‘world of shadows’. Let us imagine, says Plato, several people sitting in a cave, facing a wall projecting the *shadows* of different objects that pass behind them. For them, ‘reality’ is nothing more than this shadow. Their world is therefore ‘the world of shadows’. ‘Take a man who is released and suddenly compelled to stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look up toward the light; and who, moreover, in doing all this is in pain and, because he is dazzled, is unable to make out those things whose shadows he saw before. What do you suppose he’d say if someone were to tell him that before he saw silly nothings, while now, because he is somewhat nearer to what is and more turned toward beings, he sees more correctly?’ (Plato, 1991, p. 194) Finally, the person who has been released not only acquires a correct perception of what is in the cave, but he leaves ‘the world of shadows’ to stand up in the sunlight. After enduring all the pain of turning, metaphorically rendered by Plato, he gets to contemplate the world above. ‘In applying the going up and the seeing of what’s above to the soul’s journey up to the intelligible place, you’ll not mistake my expectation’. (Plato, 1991, p. 196) The sun symbolises the Idea of Good such that, if you manage to contemplate it, it will fascinate you to a such an extent that you will never be able to commit evil. This is the meaning of the famous saying of Socrates, that no one does evil other than from ignorance. It is known that people have always perpetrated hurt knowingly; there have always been evil plans to do harm. But there is a deeper meaning to the saying of Socrates. The ‘ignorance’ refers only to not knowing the Idea of Good. Those who come to contemplate the Good, being ecstatic, ‘aren’t willing to mind the business of human beings, but rather ... their souls are allways eager to spend their time above’. (Plato, 1991, p. 196)

Such an idealist ‘looks up’, even when he is back down in the world of shadows; but then comes something that particularly interests us in this essay about a new praise of folly: he is mocked by ordinary people and considered a *madman*. ‘And what about this? Do you suppose it is anything surprising, ... if a man, come from acts of divine contemplation to the human evils, is graceless and looks quite ridiculous when – with his sight still dim and before he has gotten sufficiently accustomed to the surrounding darkness – he is compelled in courts or elsewhere to contest about the

shadows of the just or the representations of which they are the shadows, and to dispute about the way these things are understood by men who have never seen justice itself?' (Plato, 1991, p. 196) Therefore, in the sensitive world, the only reality recognised by most people, there is no good, justice, love; in short, there are no values, but only their pitiful shadows. Obviously, whoever has once known true love or the Idea of love cannot be complacent anymore in the 'barbaric bog' of the relations that people establish 'as the world', but will always 'look up', as Plato says, to the world of Ideas and another love that is described by an expression that made history: platonic love. It is understood that in the 'world of shadows', such characters will be 'laughing stocks' because they are really unlike the world. Plato says bluntly: it is not the one who 'sees' Ideas or values in modern language who is the 'madman', but the people who laugh at him. 'But if a man were intelligent, he would remember that there are two kinds of disturbances of the eyes, stemming from two sources – when they have been transferred from light to darkness and when they have been transferred from darkness to light. And if he held that these same things happen to a soul too, whenever he saw one that is confused and unable to make anything out, he wouldn't laugh without reasoning but would go on to consider whether, come from a brighter life, it is in darkness for want of being accustomed, or whether, going from greater lack of learning to greater brightness, it is dazzled by the greater brilliance. And then he would deem the first soul happy for its condition and its life, while he would pity the second. And, if he wanted to laugh at the second soul, his laughing in this case would be less a laugh of scorn than would his laughing at the soul which has come from above out of the light.' (Plato, 1991, pp. 196–197)

Between Don Quixote de la Mancha and the world that laughs at him there seems to be the same relationship as that experienced by Plato's character who 'sees' Ideas and then returns among his peers in the world of shadows. The common element is that of the *laughing stock*. Because Don Quixote is a loser idealist, and only from this point of view, he is a *Sad Figure*. The bachelor Samson Carrasco woke him up to reality, brought him down to earth and so destroyed him. 'My reason is now free and clear, rid of the dark shadows of ignorance that my unhappy constant study of those detestable books of chivalry cast over it. Now I see through their absurdities and deceptions, and it only grieves me that this destruction of my illusions has come so late that it leaves me no time to make some amends by reading other books that might be a light to my soul. Niece, I feel myself at the point of death' (Cervantes, 2014), says Don Quixote, serenely, when he realises that absolutely all his great illusions are lost forever. Death comes

as something natural, because nobody could live without a certain naivety. Without a minimum of illusions we are all lost. It is precisely what the death of Don Quixote symbolises. And just to save him from the death of lucidity produced naturally painful, Samson Carrasco and others close to the dying do all that is possible for Alonso Quixano to be again the knight errant who he had once been. But 'now I perceive my folly', says Don Quixote, shortly before he dies. But to postpone this death, coming without any portent, once the famous hidalgo has forever lost its illusions, the one who has caused all this drama, the bachelor says: 'What? Senor Don Quixote! Now that we have intelligence of the lady Dulcinea being disenchanted, are you taking this line!' (Cervantes, 2014) But any attempt to restore his lost ideals proves to be doomed to failure. He, who had the most illusions, ends up with none.

The fact that this work of Cervantes passes as a comedy confirms the truth that 'madmen' are those for which the romance of the Knight of the Sad Figure has no value. But only those who sincerely believe in values and struggle for ideals push the world forward. Only through these aristocrats of the spirit does humanity 'look up', as Plato says.

The epitaph composed by Samson Carrasco is in anticipation of the extraordinary adventure of Cervantes's character in the culture of humanity. Death is not able to kill Don Quixote. Moreover, 'at his feats the world was scared'. After all, why should the world be scared of an idealist, a romantic, so fragile through his romance itself? Because Don Quixote is like a mirror in which the reader can see his true face, his pettiness, selfishness and meanness. For this reason the idealist is a public danger. He must be murdered through laughter. He should be made a *laughing stock*, defamed, annihilated at any price. Or if any of this is not possible, then he is allowed to pass as 'a poor madman', who must not be regarded by 'normal' people when he says, for instance, that 'virtue is of herself so mighty, that ... she will come victorious out of every trial, and shed her light upon the earth as the sun does upon the heavens'. (Cervantes, 2014)

Don Quixote's perception of values is absolutely correct until it is completely ripped from the world of the highest values and thrown by the loss of all illusions into 'normality' or a 'barbaric bog', to use a phrase of Plato's. (Plato, 1991, p. 2012) The idealist expects the world to be tailored by a good God rationally, according to the highest ideals, or at least to be easily transformed in such a direction, but is ultimately forced to conclude that it 'has no God', as they say – no sense. Hegel once gave a reply, now very well known, to a student who noticed that his theory was perfect, but did not quite fit reality: *Um so schlimmer für die Wirklichkeit!* (Spranger, 1930, p. 139) – *so much the worse for reality*. If the world does not fit with

the ideals of Don Quixote, so much the worse, you might say, paraphrasing the author of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he also being obsessed by the Knight of the Sad Figure (Kirm, 1989, pp. 292–295), similar to the whole romantic generation who saw in *Don Quixote* ‘a highly philosophical book’. (Neumeister, 2005, p. 310) It has been said rightly that the germ of modern philosophic idealism is found in Don Quixote. (Parker, 1968, p. 18)

The delirium perception that Don Quixote has of an infinite devotion to the highest values is the price paid for the correct axiological perception. But this *madman* whom Dostoevsky took as a model for the hero of his famous novel *The Idiot* is much more worthy of esteem than all other ‘normal’ people who suitably perceive the material world but are ‘blind’ to the world of spiritual values. Before losing his illusions, Don Quixote can say what Goethe would later state in the Roman Elegies: ‘See with a feeling eye: feel with a seeing hand’.

A painful axiological dilemma: idealism or wisdom

204 Despite the noble values he is trying to achieve, the idealist is everywhere ridiculed and considered a madman, but nobody laughs at the wise man; on the contrary, he has been esteemed and respected in all societies and in all ages. The wise man is the opposite of the idealist and romantic embodied by the ‘knight of virtue’, as Hegel calls Don Quixote in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The wise man, as Arthur Schopenhauer depicts him in *Aphorisms on Wisdom in Life*, is in his essence infinitely less worthy of respect than the idealist destined to become a laughing stock. Why are wise men, then, valued so much? Because their wisdom has something of the chameleonism of the world, a world for which the spirit truly noble always ‘was the scarecrow’, as they say in the epitaph of the *knight of virtue*, while the wise men did so that the shortcomings from an axiological point of view to *beseem* some virtues. The idealist bets everything on *essence*, the wise man – on *appearance*.

The wise man of Arthur Schopenhauer is really a coward, a paltry, a ruthless profiteer, a barbarian who perfectly plays the comedy of the civilised man. He embodies positive values only to a very limited extent and he is in no way an apologist for them. Otherwise, would he be worthy of the crowd’s esteem? The wise man is a selfish man because the ultimate goal of his ‘wisdom’ is his own well-being, not the good of others.

Not honesty, as a positive value, but dishonesty is what the wise man counts on; this is more reprehensible as it *appears* to be something else from a moral point of view. The wise man of Schopenhauer is the man of mask

and a genius of disguise. ‘To fight windmills’ is, for him, really madness. He sees the world as a show, so all that matters is the ‘staging’. From this perspective nothing matters other than the reaction of the ‘public’, and the ‘public’ can be won over to giving him what satisfies his petty pride.

The wise man is an exceptional administrator of opportunities. Compared to quixotic idealism, wisdom is an art of human misery. It teaches you only how to hide your own weaknesses and how to take advantage of those of others.

Yet we should not be so critical of the *wise man* and his *masks*. Friedrich Nietzsche says that every profound spirit needs a mask. The wise man is a profound spirit. He knows better than anyone that it is madness to put yourself on the world stage without wearing the suitable mask. In addition, he chooses either to live away from the unleashed world, or to slip through it and take advantage of its weaknesses, knowing also this essential fact: that it’s pointless to fight for ideals because you will be defeated anyway and you become, like Don Quixote, a ‘laughing stock’. *Virtue* has no chance against *the progress of the world*.

The wisdom in life preached by Arthur Schopenhauer in *Aphorisms on Wisdom in Life* is that of one who sees his life as being like a small business. 205 Moreover, it is easy to note that most of the maxims from eudemonology are expressed in economic and financial terms: profit, price, capital, gain, bankruptcy, etc. You do not have to be a great psychoanalyst to realise that Schopenhauer was concerned to the point of mania to protect his own capital and increase the interests that would ensure him a peaceful life.

As a *wise* trader sells his goods below the purchase price in a time of crisis to avoid bankruptcy, so the wise man, as the author of *Aphorisms on Wisdom in Life* conceives him, feels the need to ‘sell’ himself below his value when he must show himself to be ‘inferior’ or conceal his merit.

The *eudemonology* of Arthur Schopenhauer, presented in an accessible, popular form in *Aphorisms on Wisdom in Life*, comes, as the name itself indicates, from the Greek *eudaimonia* – the art of being happy (Mittelstrass, 1995, p. 600) – but it is about a strictly personal happiness, indifferent to others. *Eudemonology*, this ‘guide to a happy existence’ (Schopenhauer, 1902, p. 7) teaches you essentially that you do not have to design ideals to put the world in motion, to lift it, trying to adjust to them, but that, to have a quiet life, you must adapt to the ‘crookedness’ of the world, against which Don Quixote and idealists throughout time have reacted. Schopenhauer’s observation that ‘men are like children, in that, if you spoil them, they become naughty’ (Schopenhauer, 1902, p. 148) is fair, but, when convinced that nothing could ever change human nature, the only wise thing to do is adapt to it, slip

unnoticed through life. In this case, the rule of life formulated, like so many others, in mercantile terms, sounds like this: 'it is well not to be too indulgent or charitable with any one. You may take it as a general rule that you will not lose a friend by refusing him a loan, but that you are very likely to do so by granting it; and, for similar reasons, you will not readily alienate people by being somewhat proud and careless in your behavior; but if you are very kind and complaisant toward them, you will often make them arrogant and intolerable, and so a breach will ensue'. (Schopenhauer, 1902, pp. 148–149)

Apparently, wisdom in life is always achieved through an axiological sacrifice. You can live peacefully, or even happily, only to the extent that you can effectively manage your cowardice. Wisdom is nothing but the art of being sneaky. The wise man does not ever intend to 'align the crookedness', as Don Quixote said many times, but to take advantage of it. Only a 'madman' such as the Knight of the Sad Figure, or Prince Muishkin of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, may be unconditionally sincere and generous, and always align his thoughts to 'high targets that are to do good to all and harm to anyone' (Cervantes, 2014). Midsummer madness, as the wise man would say. He knows that even when you really cherish someone it is better for you to be dishonest, to hide your true feelings. 'It is advisable to let every one of your acquaintance – whether man or woman – feel now and then that you could very well dispense with their company. This will consolidate friendship. Nay, with most people there will be no harm in occasionally mixing a grain of disdain with your treatment of them; that will make them value your friendship all the more. Chi non istima vien stimato, as a subtle Italian proverb has it – to disregard is to win regard. But if we really think very highly of a person, we should conceal it from him like a crime. This is not a very gratifying thing to do, but it is right. Why, a dog will not bear being treated too kindly, let alone a man!' (Schopenhauer, 1902, p. 149) If this is wisdom, then, from an axiological point of view, it is a catastrophe. It is true that the wise man is not naïve; on the contrary he has a merciless lucidity. He sees better than anyone else the 'crookedness' of the world, but he indulges in it. The wise man knows that our world is hopelessly bad, the worst of all possible worlds, so it would be crazy to attempt to change it.

Comparing the *wise man* of Arthur Schopenhauer with the 'madman' of Cervantes you are faced with an axiological dilemma: lucidity without grandeur or greatness without lucidity, because it is clear that someone who sees his own life as a small business that is somewhat profitable cannot sacrifice himself for ideals. The wise man knows, for instance, that 'Politeness is a tacit agreement that People's miserable defects, whether moral or intellectual, shall on either side be ignored and not made the

subject of reproach; and since these defects are thus rendered somewhat less obtrusive, the result is mutually advantageous'. (Schopenhauer, 1902, p. 164) Schopenhauer resumes in this way an idea common to most moralists, adding, as his own contribution, a mercantile comparison: 'For politeness is like a counter – an avowedly false coin, with which it is foolish to be stingy. A sensible man will be generous in the use of it'. (Schopenhauer, 1902, p. 164) There it is – how low the wise man can be, how perfectly duplicitous, compared with the idealist as aristocrat of the spirit. In his politeness, he is generous with the fake currency and stingy beyond measure with the true one.

Opposite to *the wise man* is the idealist embodied by Don Quixote. He exaggerates in the direction of good. If this world is not the best of all possible worlds, it *may* become so. The natural goodness of Don Quixote that Cervantes repeatedly emphasises is projected onto the world. Unlike the wise man, whose fundamental concern is to sneak in a cowardly fashion among people, fitting his mask well, without even trying to change anything for the better, the idealist endeavours with all his powers to become what he should be and also to change the world, to put in motion his ideals – to make of it, despite the pessimism of the wise men, the best of all possible worlds.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant emphasises *die große Macht der Illusion*. (Kant, 1993, p. 568) Illusions are a part of human beings. A man without a certain amount of delusion would be unthinkable, or, if there was one, he could not survive more than a few moments. Without the faculty of delusion, not only the happiness of a human being but his very survival would be practically impossible. However, when it exceeds a certain limit, *the colossal power of illusion* that Immanuel Kant refers to turns on you and crushes you, like a medicine taken in too high a dose which turns into poison.

Conclusions

The meaning of life has always been linked to a higher set of values that each man, according to his ability, tends to realise. The paradox is that all creators of values, without exception, were regarded as madmen. But their 'madness' is actually the symptom of decadence and the madness of the world itself.

The opposite of the idealist who always passes for a 'madman' in the eyes of most people is the *wise man*, as he is presented by Schopenhauer in *Aphorisms on Wisdom in Life*. It is understood that, to avoid the axiological bankruptcy of life, the idealist, with his 'madness', deserves more respect than it is usually granted.

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